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Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service

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ASCS Conservation Programs



Conservation Programs

For nearly 50 years the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) has fostered the wise use of the Nation's agricultural land and water resources in partnership with farmers and ranchers.

ASCS conservation programs protect soil against erosion and waterways from pollution, encourage development of private forests, enhance wildlife habitat, and provide emergency assistance in the wake of natural disasters. In these ways ASCS conservation programs help preserve and improve the wealth and promise of America's farmlands.

Programs to solve soil loss, water conservation, and water pollution problems justify government support through cost-sharing and technical assistance by maintaining agricultural productivity and protecting the natural environment.

ASCS conservation programs are administered through local ASCS offices. A farmer-elected Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation committee works with people within the community to assess conservation problems and determine which measures should be offered to landowners in their areas to solve these problems.

The Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) is the principal channel through which ASCS helps farmers and ranchers carry out conservation and environmental protection practices. Related programs—Forestry Incentives, Rural Clean Water, Emergency Conservation, and Water Bank—emphasize particular aspects of conservation.

ASCS carries out its conservation programs in cooperation with other Federal and State agencies and organizations.



No-till planting in last year's crop residue

Agricultural Conservation Program

ACP is a cooperative endeavor by farmers, ranchers, government agencies, and other groups to solve soil, water, and related resource problems through cost-sharing and exchange of technical expertise. The program is nationwide in scope, and emphasizes enduring conservation practices of long-term benefit to the public. Practices that are primarily production oriented or have little or no conservation or pollution abatement benefits are not eligible for ACP cost-sharing.

Under the regular ACP, cost-share levels are set by local committees and are fixed for each practice. A departure from this method uses variable levels of cost-sharing. The cost-share levels are based on the severity of the erosion, and the percent reduction in soil loss obtained by installation of the practice. With emphasis on the most serious erosion problems, the cost-share per ton of soil saved is substantially less.

Practices similar to those under ACP are used extensively in related programs that define specific areas of soil, water, and forestry management, and pollution control.

Among soil-saving practices, ACP assistance is available for establishing terraces on land with steep slopes, planting grasses and legumes to anchor the soil,

installing sod waterways and structures to divert runoff water, practicing minimum tillage and no-till farming, and adopting other measures intended to control erosion, conserve water, or reduce pollution on agricultural land.

ACP funds help farmers reduce sediment, chemicals, and livestock wastes that contaminate streams and lakes by managing the flow of these pollutants at their source, by catching them in sediment basins, and by filtering them through grass and other plants.

ACP also provides assistance in establishing and improving timber stands with owners of small woodland tracts to reduce soil erosion, conserve water, improve wildlife habitat, and develop timber resources.

Emergency Conservation Program

The Emergency Conservation Program (ECP) provides emergency funds for sharing with farmers and ranchers the cost of restoring to productive use farmland seriously damaged by natural disasters, and for carrying out emergency water conservation measures during periods of severe drought.

ECP assistance is available only to help solve new conservation problems caused by a natural disaster that (1) impair and endanger the land, (2) materially affect the productive capacity of crop acreage, (3) represent

extensive damage that, except for wind erosion, is not likely to recur frequently in the same area, and (4) result in repairs so costly that Federal assistance is justified to return the land to productive agricultural use. Conservation problems existing prior to the disaster are not eligible for ECP assistance.

Emergency conservation assistance is available for removing debris from farmland, farmsteads, and private roadways associated with farmland use, grading, shaping, and releveling farmland, and restoring permanent fences, dams, ponds, irrigation systems, and other installations. Assistance is based on the type and extent of the damage.

Rural Clean Water Program

The experimental Rural Clean Water Program (RCWP) aims to prevent or reduce the amount of sediment, chemicals, livestock wastes, and other agricultural pollutants from entering streams and lakes.

The program provides long-term financial and technical assistance to owners and operators of privately held agricultural land in selected project areas who install and maintain Best Management Practices to control critical water quality problems in the area.

RCWP is designed to build on experience gained from ACP and other programs, but is limited to designated project areas with significant agriculture-related water quality problems.



Flooded cropland



Private woodland

Forestry Incentives Program

The demand for timber in this country is expected to exceed the supply within a generation unless more trees are planted and more forest land is placed under good forest management. Since commercial and public forest lands do not have the potential to meet this demand, private nonindustrial landowners, who control 58 percent of the Nation's forest lands, are encouraged to develop and properly manage their woodlands.

Through the Forestry Incentives Program, Federal and State agencies share the costs of tree planting and timber stand improvement with private forest landowners who often cannot afford to make the long-term investment required to develop their woodlands.

While the Forestry Incentives Program is specifically aimed at producing timber, forested lands also provide shelter for wildlife, conserve water, prevent soil erosion, and enhance the natural environment.

Water Bank Program

The Water Bank Program is designed to preserve, maintain, and improve inland fresh water and adjacent areas in important migratory waterfowl nesting, breeding, and feeding areas through long-term agreements with landowners and operators primarily in the central and Mississippi River flyways.

The program also serves in these protected marshes and other wetlands to enhance the habitat for migratory waterfowl and other wildlife, and contribute to control of soil erosion, flood prevention, and improved water quality. Under the Water Bank Program, landowners receive annual payments for conserving and protecting wetlands

from drainage, filling, or other practices which may destroy the character of the wetland.

Land eligible for the program must be privately owned inland fresh wetlands which are suitable for the nesting, breeding, or feeding of migratory waterfowl. Adjacent privately owned land may be included in the program if the land is needed to protect the wetland or is essential for carrying out the purposes of the program.

Beyond Tomorrow

Concern over the continuing depletion of the Nation's productive soils, the ravaging effects of pollution on our lakes and streams, and the mounting costs of soil and water conservation has led to new approaches to identifying and treating these conditions.

USDA began in 1981 to give special attention to critical resource problem areas, targeting solutions to excessive soil erosion, water shortage, or other threats to long-term agricultural productivity. Designated target areas receive additional technical and financial assistance to control or significantly reduce the problem.

By fiscal year 1987, targeted assistance is planned to account for 25 percent of the technical and financial assistance budget of ASCS and Soil Conservation Service. Targeting is also supported by USDA's Forest



Wildlife habitat



Reelfoot Lake, Tennessee

Service, Agricultural Research Service, Economic Research Service, Cooperative State Research Service, and Extension Service.

Over the years, one of the problems facing conservation program managers has been a lack of adequate data to determine the cost-effectiveness of practices. The Conservation Reporting and Evaluation System (CRES) is designed to provide data about the performance of USDA conservation programs.

These and other approaches, such as the ACP variable cost-share method of identifying the more severe soil erosion problems for priority treatment, are intended to assure that the most effective use is made of available conservation funds. That way, the Nation's prime soil and water resources are being protected and improved for generations ahead.

For more information about these ASCS programs, contact your local ASCS county office.

Participation in ASCS programs is open to all eligible applicants without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, age, or sex.